

# Myanmar - ‘I will never forgive’: How one Yangon township defied dictatorship

Fleeing workers see no future in the countryside

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**For two weeks, security forces waged a bloody war on South Dagon Township, where martial law and an uneasy standstill prevails. Frontier spoke to residents who have risked everything to resist military rule.**

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When the shooting began, Ma Lin Lin Myat turned off the lights and lay atop her daughter and son. Just as she was making herself into a shield for her children, a bullet tore through the bamboo-thatched wall of her home, in a slum in Yangon’s northeastern South Dagon Township, striking her right hip.

“I felt heat and pain, and then the blood started flowing,” Ma Lin Lin Myat, the pregnant mother of a five-year old boy and an eight-year-old girl, told Frontier on April 2 – two days after the event. “I told my mother I’d been shot, but she was convinced it was menstrual bleeding. I had to tell her again, ‘Mum, I’ve been shot!’”

The residents of South Dagon had already endured two weeks of brutal crackdowns. Still, at around 8:30pm, after the regime’s nightly curfew, a group had massed on Min Ye Kaung Pon Road in a slum in the township’s 104<sup>th</sup> ward. Soon after they’d dispersed and gone home, police and soldiers arrived and began shooting indiscriminately into homes, several witnesses told Frontier.

“After they fired shots, they yelled for all the men in the ward to come out from their houses,” Ma Lin Lin Myat said. “Then they started shooting again, in the air and into homes.”

She was one of two people shot that night. The other was 37-year-old U Aung Min Htun. The father of three was shot in the chest and shoulder and died on the street as his wife watched helplessly from the side. Security forces also arrested 15 people in the ward.



*A South Dagon resident displays live rounds used by security forces in the township on March 28. (Frontier)*

The escalation in violence in South Dagon began on March 14, the day of a massive crackdown in the heavily industrial Hlaing Tharyar Township, on the other side of the city, that left at least 58 people dead and several factories scorched. Amid the crackdown, residents of several Yangon townships, including South Dagon, took to the streets to protest in an attempt to draw security forces' attention away from Hlaing Tharyar. These protests in turn sparked a savage response. Within 24 hours, the junta had placed five Yangon townships under martial law, including Hlaing Tharyar and South Dagon.

But the residents of South Dagon had been preparing for such savagery since February 6, when they began organising a network of volunteer medics and guards to treat the injured and protect the wards. The network has also been working to document the military's atrocities.

At least 70 people have been killed in the township since March 14, according to residents, volunteer medics and a local reporter. Hundreds more have been arrested.

After clashes broke out between rifle-armed soldiers and protesters armed with slingshots, swords and Molotov cocktails on March 28, soldiers returned the following day and launched rocket-propelled grenades from armoured vehicles, setting the sandbag barricades that residents had erected to slow their advance on fire.

After the shooting on March 31, Lin Lin Myat's neighbours wanted to take her to a hospital, but she refused to go.

"I didn't want them injured or killed while taking me, so I decided to stay home – even if it meant I'd die from blood loss," she said.

She was treated the next day at a private hospital in neighbouring North Dagon Township, where she said doctors have pledged to offer her maternal and obstetric care pro bono.



*Slum dwellings in South Dagon, seen on April 2. (Frontier)*

## **A township in mourning**

As Lin Lin Myat lay atop her children, 29-year-old Ma Hla Theingyi was cooking. It was to be a memorial meal she would offer monks the next day in memory of her brother, Ko Aung Htun Aye, who at 32 years old was shot dead near the ward market on Bandoola Street at around 1am on March 27. He was on overnight guard patrol, and was armed with a slingshot and rocks, when he was hit three times in the left thigh. It took rescue workers two hours to reach him, then get him to Sanpya General Hospital in Thingangyun Township, across the Pazundaung Creek from South Dagon. There, at 4:40am, he was pronounced dead.

"I will forever mourn his loss," Hla Theingyi told Frontier on April 2.

A fellow guardsman was shot in the head and died on the spot.

While Frontier spoke to Hla Theingyi, a mourning ceremony was being held a few alleys over, in a wooden home raised on stilts, for Aung Min Htun, the 37-year-old who was shot and killed on March 31 in front of his wife, Daw Myint Myint Than.

Aung Min Htun had not participated in the protest that night, but he had gone outside to see what the commotion was and was rushing to get back inside when security forces arrived, Myint Myint Than said. He was first felled by a shot to the shoulder, before soldiers approached and began kicking his limp body. Myint Myint Than said she watched as they then dragged him across the road and, standing over him, fired one last, fatal shot into his chest.

Aung Min Htun served as a polling station volunteer in the November general election, which the military annulled the results of with its February 1 coup.

"My heart is broken," Myint Myint Than said, sitting beside a portrait of Aung Min Htun as relatives and friends streamed in to pay their respects. "The children are too young for this."

Her eldest, a 23-year-old son who asked not to be named, said he just hopes the killings end soon.

"I don't want any more families to suffer what we're suffering," he said.



Daw Myint Myint Than grieves beside a portrait of her husband, U Aung Min Htun, who was killed by security forces on March 31. (Frontier)

## **Local heroes**

Frontier was at the Sanpya hospital, a canary-yellow square of moldering concrete between Thingangyun's Yadanar and Lay Daungkan roads, when the crackdown began on the evening of March 14, and watched as dozens of people from nearby townships rushed to its emergency room.

South Dagon was not the only township where residents bravely tried to draw security forces away

from Hlaing Tharyar that day. In Thingangyun they started to protest in the late afternoon. The crackdown there was earlier than in South Dagon – around 5:30pm – and even more lethal, leaving seven dead and about a dozen detained. From there and surrounding townships, more than 40 arrived at Sanpya that night – many of them already dead.

Ma Zuu Wint Wah died instantly when she was shot in the head on South Dagon's Ayerwun Road at 7pm. She was 15. In a hallway outside of the emergency room, her father, U Tin Ko Ko Oo, sat beside her corpse, which was laid out on a portable hospital bed, begging passersby to take photos and share them online so that people would know what the military had done.

Zuu Wint Wah had taken part in anti-coup protests as soon as they began in early February. She was among the more than 300 youths arrested at a demonstration in Tarmwe Township on March 3 and locked up in Insein Prison. She was held there for a week, but left determined to continue protesting. South Dagon residents now call her the township's first hero of the "Spring Revolution".

"My daughter told me not to cry if she dies," said a sobbing Tin Ko Ko Oo. "I'm so proud of her. I will never forgive her killers."

In the days that followed, more heroes would emerge in South Dagon.

Thirty-one-year-old Ko Phoe La Pyae was fatally shot in the chest on March 30 while manning a barricade close to his home in the township's 107<sup>th</sup> ward. Roses and messages of love and grief are now strewn about the spot where he fell. As Frontier snapped a photo of the makeshift shrine, a woman shouted, "Phoe La Pyae is the hero of the 107thward!"

Residents described Phoe La Pyae as friendly and brave, and an active volunteer who was always ready to help in his community. He met his wife, Daw Ohnma, 48, 12 years ago and, despite the age difference, they fell madly in love. Two years later they had a daughter, who is now 10 years old.

"I just want to bring him back," Ohnma told Frontier at their home.



*Daw Ohnma grieves for her late husband Ko Phoe La Pyae, "the hero of the 107<sup>th</sup> ward" of South Dagon, on April 2. (Frontier)*

## Laying low

Nights are unusually quiet now in South Dagon. Residents, exhausted, do not even bang pots and pans most nights. They've avoided the nightly ritual – practiced throughout Myanmar at 8pm as a show of anti-military defiance – since March 30, when soldiers and police first began shooting into homes at any noise they heard.

The ritual was revived for one brief moment on April 1, however. At about 1pm, as CNN correspondent Ms Clarissa Ward drove through the neighbourhood – ensconced in a heavily-armoured military convoy that residents feared would shield the international reporter from the

reality of Yangon at war – residents stepped into the streets or out onto their balconies and banged whatever was to hand.

With the world watching, the soldiers held their fire that day.

Ko Min, 45, a leader of the guards' network in South Dagon and a former member of an ethnic armed group that is a signatory to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, knows Myanmar's resistance is being broadcast on international news most nights.

"I just wonder why the world is not taking effective action yet," he said. "We, the people, cherish democracy. We want it so much. That's why people are sacrificing their lives. Isn't that enough for the international community [to intervene]?"

The day after Ward drove through South Dagon, Frontier observed a massive deployment of security forces throughout the township, with their vehicles parked at several protest sites. Dozens of army trucks were also stationed at the Government Technical Institute, and small convoys carrying soldiers and police patrolled the township every hour.



*Roses and messages of love and grief are strewn about the spot where Ko Phoe La Pyae, the "hero of the 107<sup>th</sup> ward", fell on March 30. (Frontier)*

On April 9, residents told Frontier the deployments are still in place. They say the military is now trying to consolidate control by re-opening ward administration offices that had shuttered after the coup, and appointing its own administrators to run them.

"We've been expecting this. After cracking down with weapons, they are opening administration offices in the wards; the next step will be to check homes against the household registration lists. They will find and arrest more people," said a 34-year-old, one of the township's volunteer guards who asked not to be identified.

Still, like others, he remains defiant.

"Even though people have been killed, we don't think we've lost. We are determined to continue resisting, but right now we've decided to lay low," he said.

"We have to be careful for a while," said a 38-year-old woman, who also saw the township's recent quietness as only a tactical retreat. The mother of three has protested with her 15-year-old daughter and patrolled her ward at night with her 20-year-old son, a Dagon University student.

"How can we compete against their weapons? We have to compete with our morale."

## **FRONTIER**

• Frontier Myanmar. April 9, 2021:

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/i-will-never-forgive-how-one-yangon-township-defied-dictatorship/>

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## **'I don't want to be a burden': Fleeing workers see no future in the countryside**

**With jobs in rural areas scarce, thousands of workers who have returned to their villages to escape violent crackdowns in Yangon are unable to support their families and are relying on relatives.**

When Ko Lin Lin returned after an 11-year absence to the green, quiet village he had once called home, he was too anxious to appreciate the peace and beauty that he had so often missed while working in Yangon.

His mind was troubled by the possibility that he might not find a job and be able to support his family.

His home village, Sagargyi in Ayeyarwady Region's Danubyu Township, is a typical delta community of about 2,000 households that mainly rely on agriculture for their income.

"I left the village for Yangon 11 years ago because there was no job for me here. Most village residents grow paddy or beans, but for those of us who do not own land, Yangon was the only option," said Lin Lin, a father of three.

Lin Lin had settled in Yangon's heavily industrial Hlaing Tharyar Township, but when it was wracked by political unrest after the coup, he decided it would be safer to return to Sagargyi, where his parents and siblings live.

On March 14, security forces killed more than 50 people in Hlaing Tharyar in one of the most brutal crackdowns anywhere in Myanmar since the coup. Dozens of factories in the industrial zone were also burned, with the military regime and residents blaming each other for the arson attacks. That evening, the regime placed the township under martial law.  
Read more: [A day of tragedy and terror in Hlaing Tharyar](#)

"I was worried about my children; two of them are teenagers who are enthusiastic for the protests. I was afraid that they might be arrested when police raid the streets around us; if I stayed in Yangon, it would be too dangerous for them," he said.

Lin Lin had run a small restaurant in one of the industrial zones at Hlaing Tharyar that earned only a small profit, but his family made ends meet by selling liquor illegally to customers at karaoke venues near their home.

The closure of KTVs last year because of COVID-19 left Lin Lin in a difficult financial position, but he never considered leaving Yangon.

"I resisted leaving Yangon for as long as I could. I tried to stay even when my profit did not cover our basic living costs. But when the coup threatened our lives, returning home was the only option," he said.

Just four days after the March 14 crackdown, he and his family arrived back in Sagargyi, on the Ayeyarwady River. He soon began to feel anxious, though, realising that despite his 11-year absence,

something had not changed. There was still no job for him.

"It is okay to rely on parents for a few days, but it is not good for the long term because I have a big family," Lin Lin said.

"My parents are about 65 years old. They have to rely on the support of my younger siblings. If I stay here without a job, I will feel ashamed because I am the eldest son of the family," he said.

Lin Lin's story is echoed across Ayeyarwady Region, which has been a significant source of workers for Yangon's factories and construction sites since Cyclone Nargis tore through the area in May 2008, destroying homes and leaving almost 140,000 dead and missing.

But the brutal crackdowns in Yangon have prompted thousands of people living in Hlaing Tharyar, as well as Shwepyithar and South Dagon, which are also now under martial law, to return to delta home towns and villages like Sagargyi.

Daw San, who has a shop in the Sagargyi village market, said she had noticed many returnees from Yangon, as well as strangers, since early March.

"In the mornings, the market is unusually crowded. Normally it's open until 11am but these days meat such as fish and pork are sold out by 9am," she said.

Although the returnees feel safe staying in the village, they are uncertain about their ability to earn income to support themselves and their families. Competition for the few available jobs in the region is now fiercer than ever, and most of the returnees Frontier interviewed had been unable to find work.

Lin Lin wants to open a small shop selling rice and curries but he knows it is not a good choice.

"There are already two shops like that. Besides, as you know, villagers like to cook for themselves. They don't want to waste money buying food outside," he said.

Lin Lin's wife, Daw Sandar, is trying to make money by cooking mohinga, a traditional breakfast dish of vermicelli and fish broth, for families when they hold donation ceremonies called aloo eain.

Families in Danubyu's Htone Bone village are facing similar challenges. All of Daw Thi Thi Khine's four adult children returned to their parent's home from Hlaing Tharyar, where they worked in factories, after the brutal March 14 crackdown.

"Their factories closed and I was worried about their safety in Yangon. I made them return even though they did not want to come back. They said they could find other jobs in Yangon but my mind would be unsettled if they stayed there. It is better for the family to be together, even if we all starve," said Thi Thi Khine, 55.

She said she had been receiving K100,000 a month from each of her children when they were working in Yangon, which had been enough to support her.

"Although there are no jobs for my children here, I have some savings to help us survive this crisis. I have no idea what they'll do in the future; they have all said they would return to Yangon when it is stable," she said.

Although they have enough for the moment, her youngest son has been given a job by a landowner in the village that includes tending cattle and harvesting crops and is paid K2,000 a day.



The families are worried about their children's future due to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in urban areas because of the coup.

Read more: Leaving Hlaing Tharyar: factory workers flee city for uncertain future

The fallout from the military takeover has devastated Myanmar's economy, with the World Bank forecasting a 10.0 percent contraction in 2020-21 and warning that it will "likely result in a sharp increase in poverty, heightened food security risks, and deeper destitution for those already poor".

More recently, Fitch Solutions has predicted a 20.0pc contraction and warned of impending "economic collapse".

Manufacturing has been among the hardest-hit sectors. The garment sector alone previously employed as many as 700,000 people, but many factories in Yangon have shuttered due to lack of workers, logistical challenges and buyers suspending orders.

It's not clear how many of the jobs that have been lost will return, and if so, when. But most of those who have left Yangon see little future for themselves in the countryside.

Daw Aye Aye Myint, 53, returned with her husband and son from Hlaing Tharyar to their coastal village in the Shwethaungyan area of Ayeyarwady's Patheingyi Township a few weeks ago.

They moved to Yangon last year after her son got a job at a soap factory in Hlaing Tharyar, but he was laid off in mid-February.

"His income was about K400,000 a month. When he was laid off, I tried to sell vegetables at a nearby market, but the situation in Hlaing Tharyar deteriorated and we decided to return to our village for a while," she said.

There are only jobs for men in the villages. They include toiling on the bamboo fishing rafts called kyar phaung that are launched from Ayeyarwady Region's Pyawbwe Township, and are notorious for the terrible working conditions.

Aye Aye Myint does not want her son to get a job on one of the rafts because the work is exhausting and he would have to spend extended periods at sea.

"His father worked on kyar phaung for many years. That's why his health is bad now, even though he is only 56. I don't want my son to work like that," she said. "I am planning to sell some land to cover our living expenses for the time being."

Aye Aye Myint said her family would return to Yangon as soon as it is stable and safe, to ensure her son did not work on a fishing raft.

Lin Lin has a similar attitude. "If Yangon becomes a safe place to live again, I will return and reopen my tiny restaurant," he said. "It doesn't matter if I don't make a profit. I don't want to stay here and be a burden on my parents."

## Frontier

• Frontier Myanmar. April 8, 2021:

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/i-dont-want-to-be-a-burden-fleeing-workers-see-no-future-in-the-countryside/>



